

Fluent Speech in Second Language and its Associated Varying Perceptions

Research Thesis

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by

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Abstract

From the language teaching and learning aspects, the definition of fluency in second language oral proficiency is multi-faceted, and a clearly defined meaning does not exist. This is problematic when it comes to assessment of L2 learners' speech competence, specifically speech assessment rubrics, because the judgement of fluency can then become subjective. In this paper, I examine elements of fluent speech and seek a solution to improve the definition of the fluency concept in L2 learning. First, I examine the current literature which demonstrates that no clear definition exists for the fluency concept, based on the definitions of fluency by various authors. I then discuss the results of two online studies which aimed to define fluency based on the perspectives of students and instructors of German. These studies confirmed that while a general meaning can be formed from the perspectives of students and instructors, a concise definition is yet to be created and further research must be done in order to come to a more concrete, widely used and accepted meaning. In addition, I suggest that speech assessment rubrics may be improved by creating sub-categories within the fluency assessment category to better reflect the multi-faceted fluency concept.

Fluent Speech in Second Language and its Associated Varying Perceptions

A vast range of definitions exist for the term fluency. According to the Merriam Webster online dictionary, the full definition of fluent is: “1a) capable of flowing, fluid b) capable of moving with ease and grace 2a) capable of using a language easily and accurately b) effortlessly smooth and flowing, polished c) having or showing mastery of a subject of skill” (Merriam Webster, Online Dictionary). In addition, it states: “the Latin word *fluere*, meaning ‘to flow,’ gives us the root word **flu**. Words from the Latin *fluere* have something to do with flowing,” (Merriam Webster, Online Dictionary). In my pursuit to achieve fluent speech in my second language (German), I have come across the concept of fluency—and how to define it—on multiple occasions. When friends and family members ask me if I am fluent, I routinely answer “no,” (still feeling inadequate in the way I speak when it comes to my L2 language) have led to my own questioning of what fluency means to me, and in addition, what fluency means to second language acquisition on a broad spectrum. I have contemplated when (if ever) I will be able to achieve the native level of fluency, or, at least, come close to it, and how will I know when I get there? My working definition of fluency is currently that it is not as simple as it may seem. For me, fluency is not only made up of speech, but of cultural competency as well, and the smooth exchange of conversation. My senior research project has stemmed out of my personal quest to define fluency in my own second language acquisition process.

First, I will conduct a literature review pertaining to ideas that represent the most current fluency research in regard to the definition of fluency as well as to common obstacles that arise in an attempt to define this concept. I conclude each segment with a definition of fluency based

on the author's perspective. Second, I discuss the procedure and results of two online studies I conducted in the spring semester of 2016, which seek to gain a better understanding of fluency by gathering data based on both undergraduate students' and instructors' perspectives of fluency. Based on the data gathered from instructors and students, these studies aim to apply the student and instructor perspectives to teaching methods relevant to second language learning acquisition. Third, I discuss my findings which involve the complex perspectives of both students and instructors, and briefly re-visit Segalowitz's (2010) idea that "language is motion, concluding that more research must be done in order to reach a clearer definition of the fluency concept.

Literature Review

If fluency can be defined more specifically, this could potentially pave the way for improvements within foreign-language instruction inside of the university and at other language learning institutions. Francine Chambers (1997) touches on this in her article, "What do we Mean by Fluency?" where she points out how important it is to agree on a definition of fluency, as well as understanding the development of fluency in an educational context, so that the learners of the L2 language may be taught the language more accurately. Chambers (1997) discusses fluency in both ordinary life as having "an extended meaning and [...] used as a synonym of overall oral proficiency" (p. 535) and in "the assessment of foreign language proficiency [where] it is one of several descriptors of oral performance," (p. 535). Chambers (1997) stresses the importance of reaching this definition in order to create conditions that will truly improve the fluency of language learners by teachers (p. 535). In her article, she seeks to define fluency more accurately, by reviewing both quantitative and qualitative research. She looks at fluency pertaining to its use as a "performance descriptor for oral assessment of foreign language learners and as an indicator of progress in language learning" (p. 535). According to

Chambers (1997), there are two problems when it comes to creating a more accurate definition of fluency, which are 1) fluency is often a symbol of oral proficiency, which is vague in its meaning, and 2) the word “fluency” is often used from a language teaching perspective to express “accuracy” (p. 536). Chambers (1997) concludes that in order for the concept of fluency to be used as an assessment of oral proficiency in the foreign language, we must distinguish it from overall language proficiency and communicative competence.¹ Thus, to Chambers (1997) the definition of the fluency concept is largely unresolved, and we must be aware of the fact that the two forms of fluency—overall proficiency in a colloquial sense and oral proficiency in an academic setting—must be separated in order to mark their validity, specifically the validity of fluency in an academic setting.

In another study conducted by Bosker et al. (2012), they address three components of speech—breakdown, speed, and repair fluency—to measure the fluency ratings of four control groups.² Bosker et al. (2012) conducted four experiments in which untrained raters who spoke native Dutch would evaluate the oral fluency of native and non-native Dutch speakers from several recorded monologues, of approximately 20 seconds each. Experiment 1-4 used the same speech materials, but a new group of native Dutch speakers was used for each experiment. Altogether, there were eighty participants, which allowed Bosker et al. (2012) to gather data from a variety of perspectives pertaining to breakdown, speed, and repair. From the native Dutch speakers’ evaluations, Bosker et al. (2012) concluded that breakdown and speed fluency were the most significant aspects tied to the perception of fluency, with repair fluency being less

¹ Communicative competence is defined by Canale and Swain (1980) as three units: grammatical competence: words and rules; sociolinguistic competence: appropriateness; and strategic competence: appropriate use of communication strategies.

² Bosker et al. (2012) define breakdown fluency as “the extent to which a continuous speech signal is interrupted” (p. 160), speed fluency as the rate of speech and density of language, and repair fluency is defined as the amount of self-corrections and repetitions in spoken language.

significant. In addition, the study concluded that not only is intuition used when making judgements of whether speech is fluent or not, but also that the listeners assess the speech based on their own varying perspectives of what they determine fluent speech consists of. Based on this conclusion, I propose that the definition of fluency derived from Bosker et al.'s (2012) study is one that changes with perspective, as the listener must weigh the importance of fluency aspects when making judgements in a conversation. Thus, the perception of fluency is a subjective decision, and one that is difficult to structure.

A study by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) seeks to better understand the development of both grammatical and pragmatic³ proficiency of L2 learners. This study used video-recordings of 20 different scenarios to test 543 EFL (English as the first language) and ESL (English as the second language) learners and their teachers in Hungary and the United States. The study also included a secondary sample of 112 EFL speakers from Italy. According to Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998), “research has...shown that grammatical development does not guarantee a corresponding level of pragmatic development,” (p. 234). As both grammatical and pragmatic elements are vital components of fluency, this is a potential concern when teaching a language, so that the pragmatic elements are stressed just as much as grammar. For example, if an L2 student is being judged in an oral exam (in a university setting), and this student speaks very slowly; however, most if not all of the student's grammatical constructions are correct, this student is likely to be judged very well due to how the language learning process is set up in the university with very much stress placed on grammar, but not as much importance placed on pragmatic elements. Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) focus on the idea of awareness, particularly the first phase of awareness, which they define as the act of noticing.

³ Pragmatics can be defined as knowing when to use certain elements of speech in the appropriate context. Brasdefer (2012) defines second language pragmatics as “the ability to produce and understand communicative action in an L2.”

This focus on awareness considers the errors that language learners notice first and how serious they view these errors (Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei, 1998). Applying this concept of awareness to their study, Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei examine learners' awareness of errors in grammar and pragmatics. To answer their research question, they investigated the environment in which the language was instructed, the learners' language proficiency level, and the awareness (of grammar and errors) of the instructors. The findings of this study conclude that the judgments of the EFL learners rated grammatical errors as worse than pragmatic errors, while the ESL learners rated the errors in the opposite way, ranking pragmatic errors as worse than grammatical. Overall, the EFL and ESL teachers were shown to be more aware of both grammatical and pragmatic errors than the students (Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei, 1998). In addition, this study found that residency makes a significant difference for pragmatic and grammatical awareness in L2 speech. This is because in addition to the classroom environment, learners now have an additional environment outside of the classroom. With this additional learning platform, the "ESL learners had the opportunity for additional target-learning interaction, although learners take advantage of this to different degrees" (Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei, 1998, p. 253). I have experienced this personally, in my study abroad trip to Dresden, Germany, in the summer of 2014. While having this additional learning environment as stated in Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) study, it was difficult to move outside of my comfort zone, since I was, on most occasions, surrounded by other students from the United States, who all spoke English as their native language. However, when I chose or was "forced" to be alone in the environment of my L2, this helped my L2 skills tremendously. Based on Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) study, I suggest that their definition of fluency is based on two concepts, which are the pragmatic

and grammatical constructs of an L2 language. In addition, the contrasting results by EFL and ESL learners demonstrate that there is a misunderstanding of the fluency concept.

Pinget et al.'s study investigates what native speakers take into account when judging the fluency and accent of L2 learners. In addition, their study aims to "advance our understanding of the concepts of fluency and accent as characteristics of L2 speech" (p. 350). The authors suggest that gaining more knowledge pertaining to what causes L2 speech to sound fluent or accented can be invaluable when it comes to language testing methods (Pinget et al., 2014). To conduct their study, Pinget et al. (2014) took ninety speech fragments from English and Turkish L2 learners of Dutch and determined which aspects from these fragments they considered "acoustic measures of fluency and accent" (p. 349). In the first experiment, 20 native speakers of Dutch rated these speech fragments on fluency. In the second experiment, 20 untrained native Dutch speakers rated the same speech fragments on accent. Pinget et al. (2014) found that "speech that is rated as less fluent also tends to be rated as more accented" (p. 362) as well as that "fluency and perceived foreign accent can be judged as separate constructs" (p. 349). Thus, from Pinget et al.'s (2014) findings, fluency can be defined as the flow of speech apart from foreign accent, although foreign accent plays a role in determining one's fluency, it can be regarded as a separate element from fluency.

Barbara F. Freed's (2000) article, "Is Fluency, Like Beauty, in the Eyes (and Ears) of the Beholder?" discusses, similar to Chambers, the conflicting and large variety of definitions when it comes to fluency. According to Freed (2000), the vast meaning of the term fluency, which is used globally to define language competence, is just one element of fluency, and one that should be assessed separately from language proficiency. In her study, Freed asks, "what is it that listeners and readers attend to when making references to 'fluent' speech or writing?" (p. 245)

Freed's (2000) attempts to answer this question based on a sample of thirty undergraduate students, who were in the process of learning the French language. Freed (2000) notes in her article that fifteen studied abroad (in France) for the semester the study was conducted, and fifteen stayed on their university campus (p. 246). Data was then collected from these students over the course of the semester, including speech samples, which were then evaluated by six native French speakers. One important conclusion of Freed's (2000) article was that "students who had studied abroad were shown to have made greater progress, in terms of perceived fluency, than those who had remained at home" (p. 259). Freed (2000) also concluded that the six native French speakers' judgements of fluency were based on "hesitation phenomena...global perceptions of rhythm, vivacity, and tone of voice" (p. 260). Two defining factors which set the students who studied abroad from the students who stayed on campus were speech rate (students who studied abroad spoke faster) and the amount of speech (students who studied abroad spoke more in general) (Freed, 2000). Freed (2000) concludes that her results may be viewed as an affirmation that the global definition of fluency is much broader than only the flow of speech, which involve both hesitation and repair phenomena. I propose that fluency could be defined from this article as several elements which include hesitation and repair phenomena, speech rate, and amount of speech.

Segalowitz (2010) takes a cognitive science approach to fluency in his book, *Cognitive Bases of Second Language Fluency*. He proposes that within the field of cognitive science, and even outside of it, a completely developed structure does not exist for examining fluency in a methodical way. Furthermore, he suggests that "if something is to be done about improving fluency, there will need to be a greater understanding of what underlies such fluency gaps, why the gaps are so difficult to overcome, and what conditions are best for reducing them" (p. 2).

Segalowitz (2010) goes on to discuss Fillmore's (1979) definition of fluency, who creates four different categories or types of fluency. The first type is the capacity to speak for an extended period of time with very little hesitation. The second type of fluency is the ability to speak in succinct sentences, without additional "filler" phrases. The third type is the knowledge of discourse appropriate for the type of conversation one is a part of. For example, one may speak differently with professional colleagues than with close friends. Finally, the fourth type of fluency is to be able to use the language in a creative fashion, for example, the ability to use a metaphor (Segalowitz, 2010). Segalowitz (2010) asks some pertinent questions when it comes to fluency research, including "what does it mean, in ordinary language, to say that someone is fluent in an L2?" (p. 3) and proposes that "a theme underlying the meaning of the word fluency is the conceptual metaphor language is motion" (p. 4), which is similar to the first entry of fluent in the Merriam Webster dictionary "capable of flowing, fluid."

Based on the above articles, fluency can be made up of many elements, and of conflicting perspectives. While the authors are aware of the gray area in the fluency concept, and this concept is not hotly debated, the definition of fluency is nevertheless a compelling question when it comes to L2 language learning and teaching. The previous literature review concludes that a clear, universal definition for the concept of fluency does not exist, and instead, fluency, in an educational environment, is judged largely on the perceptions of fluency held by those conducting the judging. In the following study I aim to develop a greater understanding of the varying perspectives on fluency of students and instructors in a second language, and attempt to come closer to a clearer definition of the L2 fluency concept. Through achieving a clearer definition this study aims to improve L2 teaching and learning aspects within the university and other foreign-language instruction institutions regarding assessment and rubric development for

L2 fluency. I seek to answer two questions through the following study: 1) Do language learners and instructors view fluency differently? And 2) is the fluency concept too subjective to come to a clear, universal definition?

Method: Study 1

Participants

Study 1 included two survey platforms entitled, “What is Fluency?” One survey was created for undergraduate students of German, and the other for instructors of German. The undergraduate sample totaled thirty-one students, made up of one Freshman, six Sophomores, eleven Juniors, seven Seniors, and six 5th year or higher Seniors. Sixteen males and fifteen females participated in the survey, ranging in age from 19-31. The students had a wide range of majors which were: German, Public Affairs, English and American studies, Molecular Genetics, Pharmaceutical Sciences, Journalism, Communications, Political Science, Accounting Economics, Marketing, Air Transportation, Aerospace Engineering, Korean, International Relations, International Development, Philosophy, and History. English was the native language of most respondents as well as the language they spoke at home, with the exception of three students. Six Students were learning a language in addition to German, and those languages were: Greek, Russian, Korean, Czech, and Swahili. One Student was learning three of the aforementioned languages: German, Czech, and Russian.

The Instructor Survey “What is Fluency?” was made up of seventeen individuals, eight of which were graduate teaching associate’s and nine of which were instructors. Of those seventeen, six were male, ten were female, and one was transgender. Two participants were in the age range category 18-25, nine were in the category from 25-45, and six were in the category of 45+. Their teaching experience ranged from 1-38 years. English was the native language of ten of the respondents, followed by German with six native speakers, and finally Latvian at one.

The years lived in the L2 country (the United States) ranged from 0-20 years, with 13 responses in total. The level of German taught by the respondents ranged from beginner level to advanced, including graduate courses.

Design of Study 1 Online Survey: What is Fluency?

The students and instructors first answered a variety of demographic questions, which led to the results of the preceding participant description. Second, the students were asked the following questions through the online survey platform: 1) What does fluency in speech (in the foreign language) mean to you? 2) How do you think one develops fluent speech? 3) What are you doing to become fluent in your second language(s)? and finally, 4) Which of the following elements of speech do you consider an aspect of fluency? Options given were: Appropriate Pragmatics (knowing what to say when), Speech that is grammatically correct, The flow of speech and exchange of conversation, Pronunciation/Accent, or Other (please specify).

In the same fashion, the instructor survey included a short demographic questionnaire, followed by a few questions about fluency. These questions were similar to the undergraduate survey and included: 1) What does fluency mean to you? 2) What elements do you use in your classroom to help your students become fluent? and 3) (the same as question 4 for the undergraduate survey) Which of the following elements of speech do you consider an aspect of fluency? Options given were the same: Appropriate Pragmatics (knowing what to say when), Speech that is grammatically correct, The flow of speech and exchange of conversation, Pronunciation/Accent, or Other (please specify).

Stimulus Description

The online questionnaire was conducted through the online survey platform, Survey Monkey. For the student survey, fluency questions 1, 2, and 3 all allowed the students to freely answer the question, providing a fill-in-the-blank as the only response option. For the last

question, students were able to choose one or all of the options given. For the instructor survey, fluency questions 1 and 2 were fill-in-the-blank, and the last question was designed the same as the last question on the student survey.

Procedure

Students were recruited in class, through an oral presentation explaining the type of research and what was required from them, including the review of informed consent procedures. Instructors were recruited through e-mail, using a similar script as given to the students, but in text form instead of orally. It was explained to the students and instructors that their identities would be anonymous, and only their responses would be recorded.

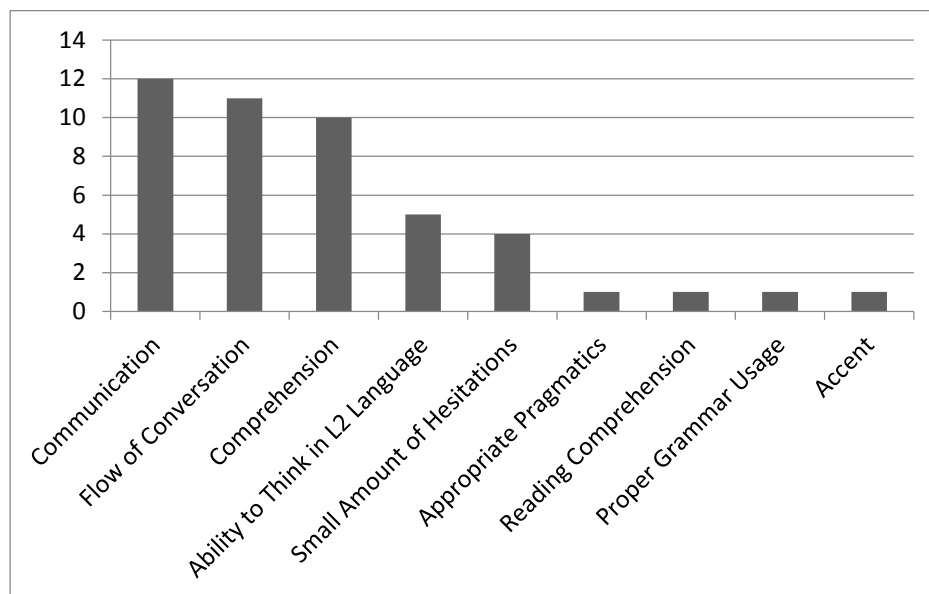
Results

The first question students were asked in the Undergraduate Survey was “What does Fluency (in the foreign language) mean to you?” (Figure 1.1) Participants defined fluency as communication and the ability to express oneself clearly most often, with 12 out of 31 participants responding that this definition constituted one aspect of or the sole meaning of fluency to them. Eleven respondents stated that fluency to them was the ease and smooth flow of a conversation. Ten of the respondents said understanding the L2 language was important. Five of the participants said that the ability to think in the L2 language was an aspect of fluency. Four said that little to no hesitation in speech defined fluency for them. Correct pragmatics, ability to read, grammatically correct speech, and accent, were only mentioned once by various respondents.

The second question was: “How do you think one develops fluent speech?” (Figure 1.2) Living abroad/immersion appeared the most, with 15 participants saying that this was vital in developing fluent speech. Ten respondents said they developed fluent speech through “practice”

(although not defining what practice was) and repetition. Reading and writing were reported five times, and instruction, vocabulary building, and listening had two respondents each.

FIGURE 1.1: What does Fluency (in the foreign language) mean to you?



The third question asked was, “What are you doing to become fluent in your second language(s)?” (Figure 1.3) Students answered listening in the form of various media (including podcasts, music, listening to native speakers, and watching TV) 15 times, with reading newspapers or other media appearing 13. Taking classes also appeared 13 times in the responses. Speaking the L2 language came up ten times, and visiting the L2 country as well as memorizing vocabulary appeared five times. Playing online language games or video games came up four times, and writing and translating appeared three times. Awareness of the language and what one is saying (including others’ reactions and speech errors) appeared once, along with thinking in the L2 language, and no desire to be fluent in the foreign language.

In the fourth question, “Which of the following elements of speech do you consider an aspect of fluency?” (Figure 1.4) The option “flow of speech and exchange of conversation” was chosen the most, with thirty respondents. Appropriate pragmatics came in second with 29

responses, Pronunciation/Accent had twenty-five responses, and Speech that is grammatically correct was chosen the least, with twenty-three responses. There were five other responses which included: cultural knowledge, understanding what someone else is saying in the L2 speech, and understanding body language.

FIGURE 1.2: How do you think one develops fluent speech?

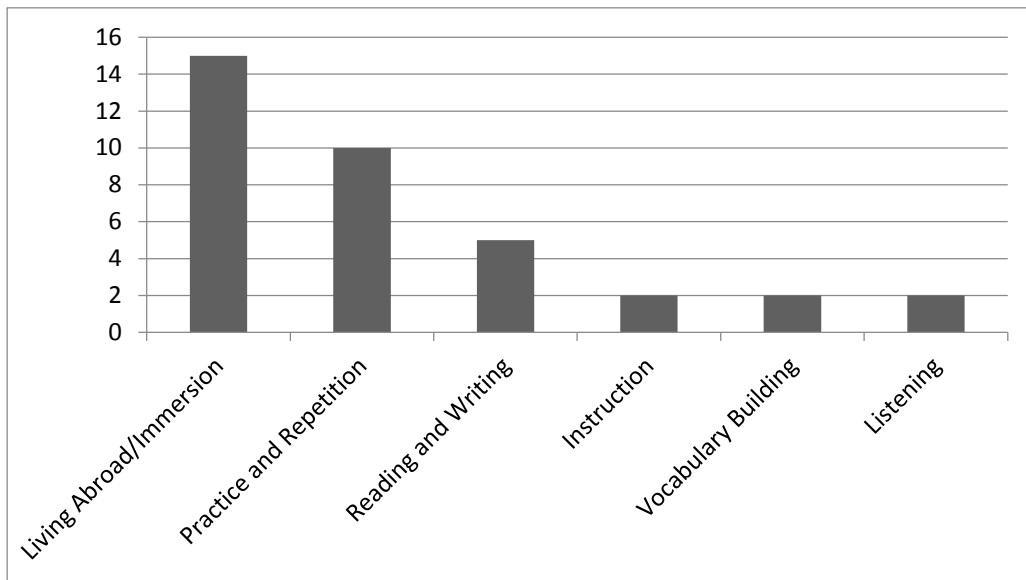


FIGURE 1.3: What are you doing to become fluent in your second language(s)?

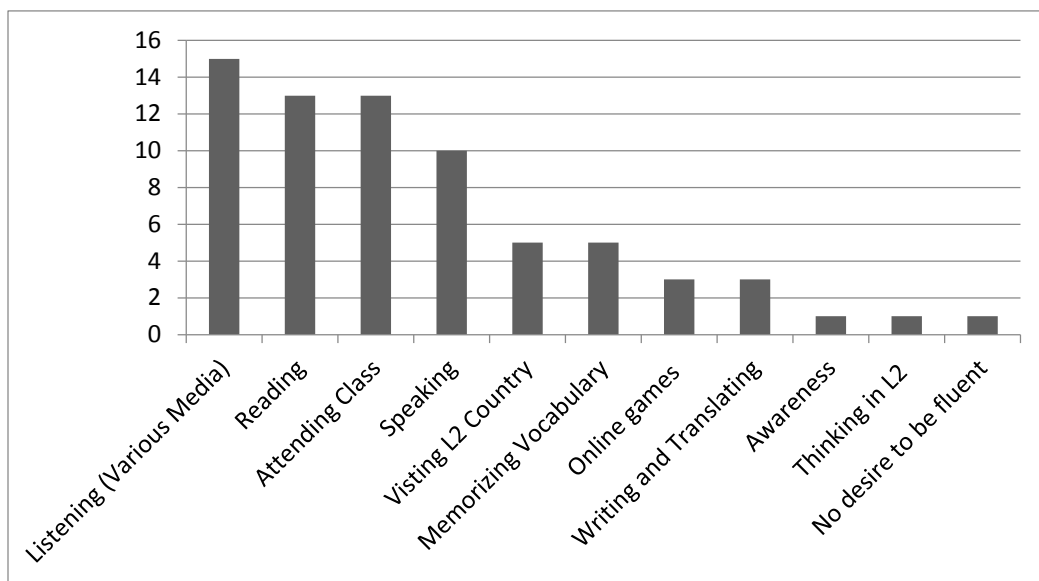
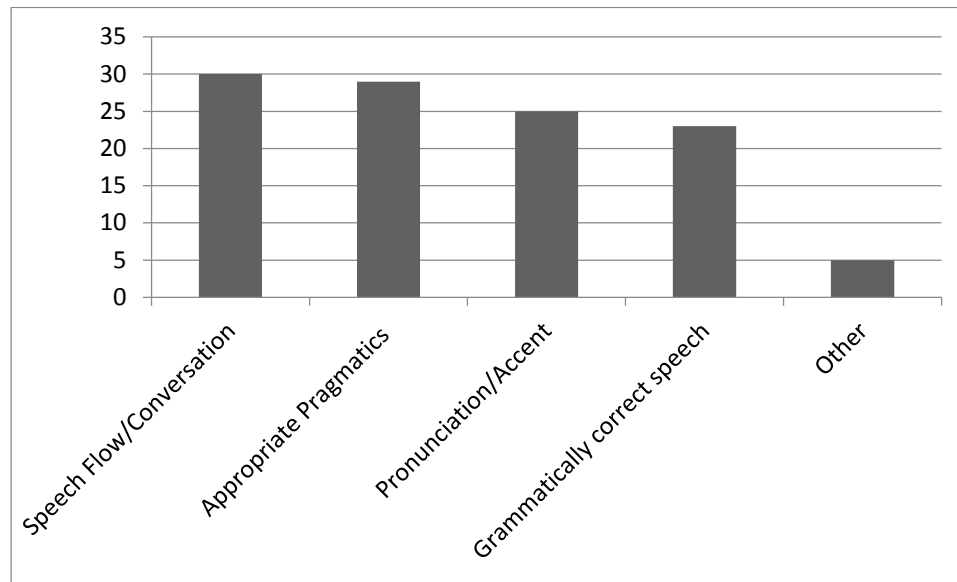


FIGURE 1.4: Which of the following elements of speech do you consider an aspect of fluency?

In the Instructor Survey, the first question was “What does fluency mean to you?” (Figure 1.5) The definition of fluency as “flow and ease of conversation” appeared the most, with nine participants saying that this was one aspect of or the sole meaning of fluency for them. Seven respondents included “small amount of hesitations”, six said comprehensible oral speech was important, and four defined fluency as the knowledge of the language and the correct use of vocabulary. Four also included written communication as an aspect of fluency, while three included comprehension, proper grammar usage, and pronunciation/accent. Few self-corrections, reading comprehension, and appropriate pragmatics were used the least in defining fluency, each only appearing twice in the responses of the instructors.

The second survey question for instructors was: “What elements do you use in your classroom to help your students become fluent?” (Figure 1.6) The majority of participants (13) said they use Speaking and Listening strategies, with reading and writing in the L2 appearing seven times as a response. Partner work and pragmatics instruction appeared five times, and

various vocabulary strategies appeared four. Scaffolding came up twice, and focus on grammar and syntax and pronunciation/accent practice appeared in the responses only once.

FIGURE 1.5: What does fluency mean to you?

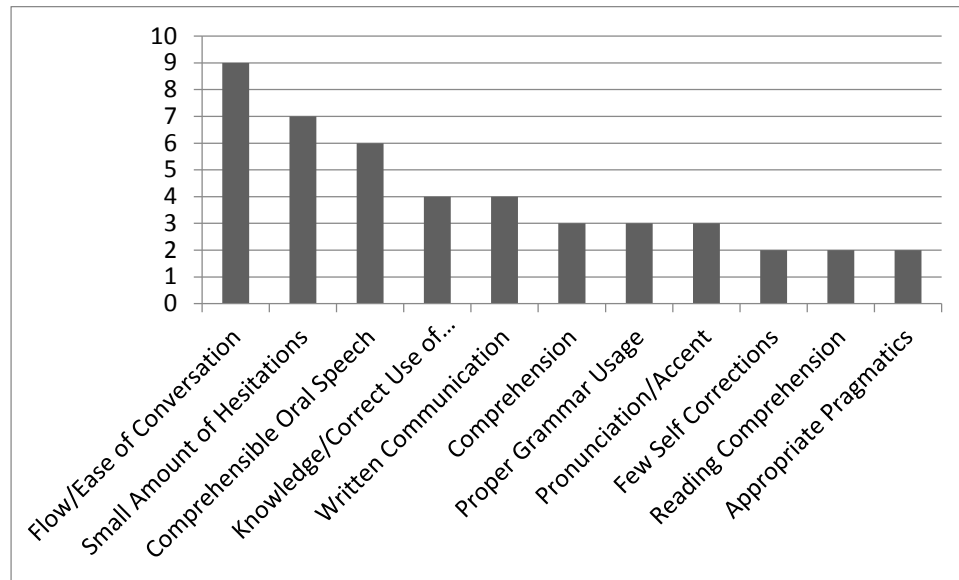
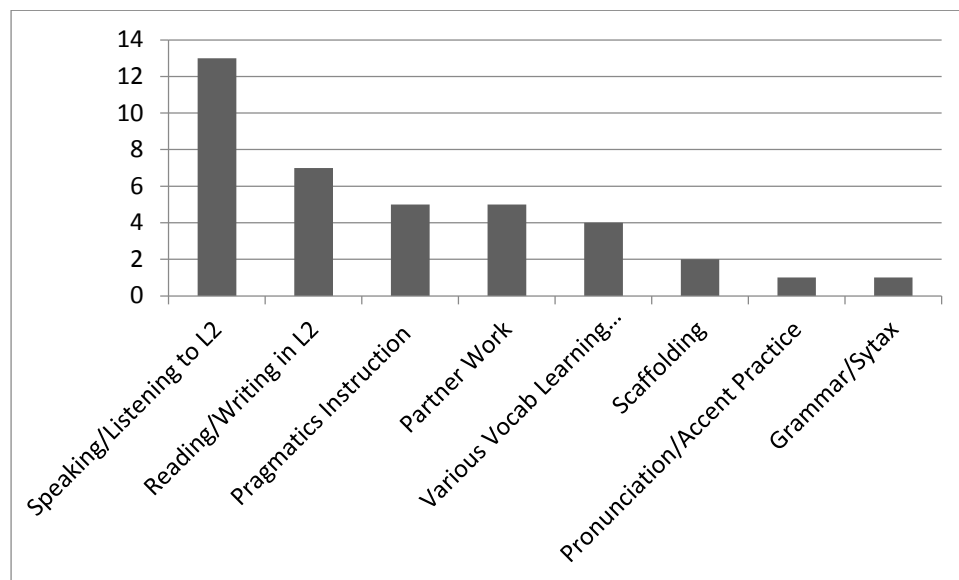
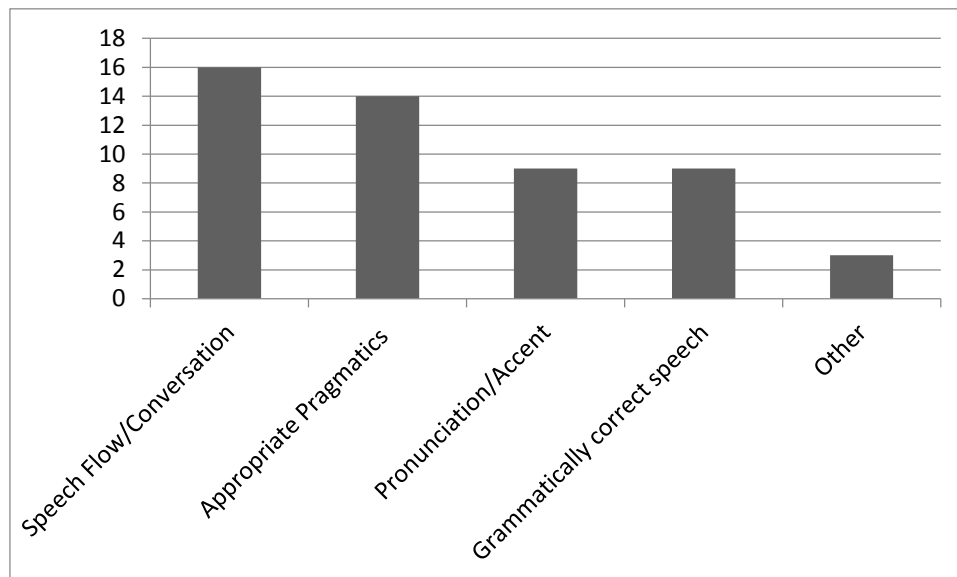


FIGURE 1.6: What elements do you use in your classroom to help your students become fluent?



The third question, which was identical to the fourth question on student survey asked, “Which of the following elements of speech do you consider an aspect of fluency?” (Figure 1.7) Similar to the student responses, “the flow of speech and exchange of conversation” option was chosen the most, with 16 responses. The “appropriate pragmatics” option was chosen 14 times, with “Pronunciation/Accent” and “Speech that is grammatically correct” being chosen nine times. There were three other responses which included cultural competency, difficulty of topic, and variety of vocabulary.

FIGURE 1.7: Which of the following elements of speech do you consider an aspect of fluency?



Method: Study 2

Participants

The participants of the listening study consisted of a wide variety of individuals, ranging from freshmen undergraduate students to professors. The listening study was not divided between instructors and undergraduate students; instead all participants listened to the same monologues and answered the same questions. The participants consisted of nine males and 18

females and included: one freshman student, two sophomore students, two junior students, eight senior students, one graduate student, five graduate teaching associates, three lecturers, and four professors.⁴ The demographic questions asked of participants were much narrower than the first study, and were made up of only gender and year in college or position within the university.

Design of Study 2 Online Listening Survey: What is Fluency?

Participants were asked to answer two demographic questions, the results of which have been reviewed in the previous participant description. Participants were then asked to listen to three monologues and rate them based on the following three descriptors: Not Fluent at all, Somewhat Fluent, Most Fluent. Participants were then asked to explain why they chose that answer. After answering the questions about the three monologues, participants were asked to answer the following ranking question about fluency, which was a re-working of the multiple choice question from Study 1: “Please rank the following elements of speech, starting with the one you think is most important in evaluating fluency (1 as most important, 3 as least important.)” The elements of speech given were: Speech that is grammatically correct, The flow of speech, and Pronunciation/accent.

Stimulus Description

The design of the questions was presented in a multiple choice, drop-down menu, ranking, or fill-in-the-blank format. Three monologues were given to the participants to rate. Monologue 1: Aaron⁵ was considered to be a Somewhat Fluent speech sample, Monologue 2: Emma was considered to be the Most Fluent speech sample, and Monologue 3: Katie was considered to be the Least Fluent speech sample. Each monologue was a brief, one-minute or

⁴ Although 28 participants made up the sample for the study, after the results were reviewed, it was apparent that some participants only answered the survey partially; thus, on average, 22 participants were actively engaged in the survey in its entirety.

⁵ The names used in the Monologues are pseudonyms, given in order to protect the identity of the speakers.

less clip, where the speakers talked about what they liked to do in their free time. All speech samples had been a part of a previous class assignment, where the students were asked to record themselves speaking about a particular topic. The speech samples were all from students at the university, who consented to the use of their speech samples in the study.

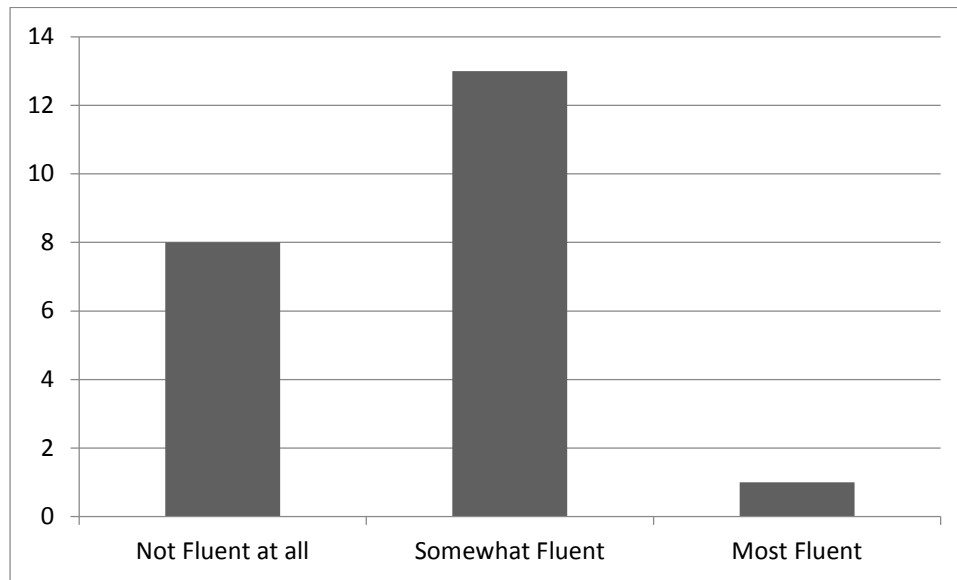
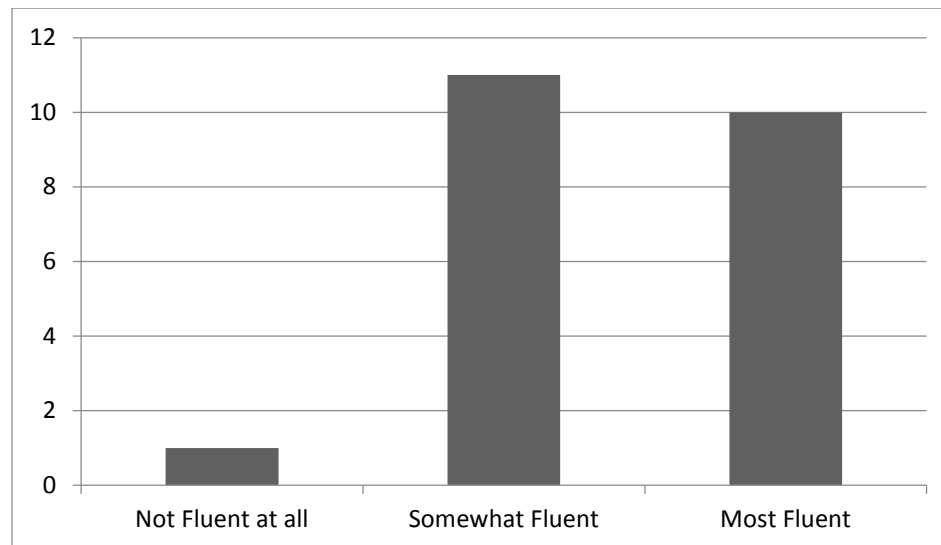
Procedure

Students and instructors were recruited for Study 2 through an e-mail which explained the type of research and what was required from them, including reviewing informed consent procedures. It was explained to the students and instructors that their identities would be anonymous, and only their responses would be recorded.

Results

Monologue 1: Aaron (Figure 2.1), considered to be “Somewhat Fluent,” received the majority of “Somewhat Fluent” ratings; however, “Not fluent at all” followed closely behind, with one respondent ranking Aaron as the “Most fluent.” Positives of Aaron’s speech sample were good accent and confident speaker, with many negatives including uncomfortable speaker, choppy flow, no self-correction of mistakes, incorrect verb usage, difficulties in comprehending speaker, simple sentence structure, excessive hesitations, and sentence order mistakes.

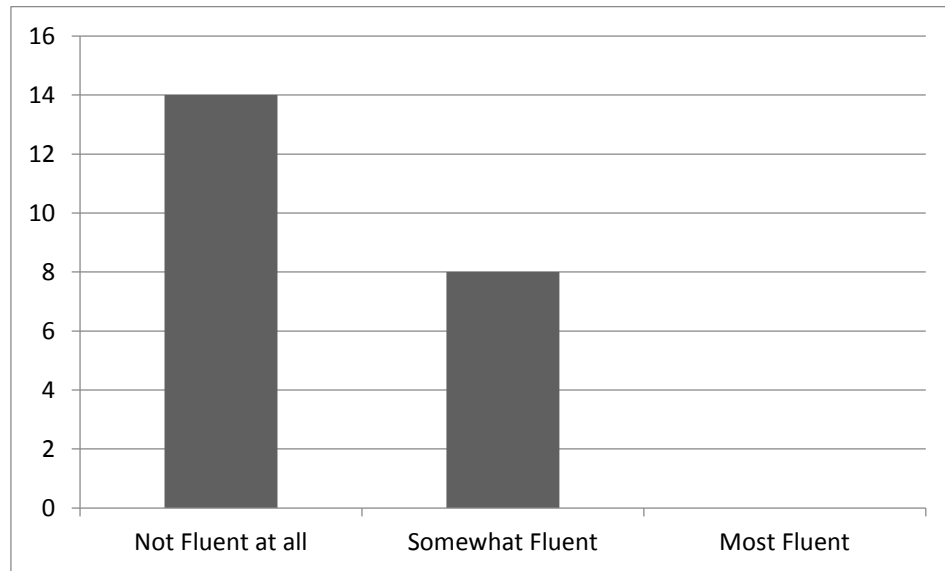
Monologue 2: Emma (Figure 2.2) was considered to be the most fluent speech sample, and was consistently rated on a closely even scale of “Somewhat Fluent” and “Most Fluent.” The positive descriptors of her speech sample included good pronunciation, quick self-correction, good rate of speech, fair-good accent, variety of sentence structures, confident speaker, and comprehension of speaker, while the negative responses were some word searching, slow and systematic speech, simple sentence structure, some hesitation, and some mispronounced words.

FIGURE 2.1: Aaron**FIGURE 2.2: Emma**

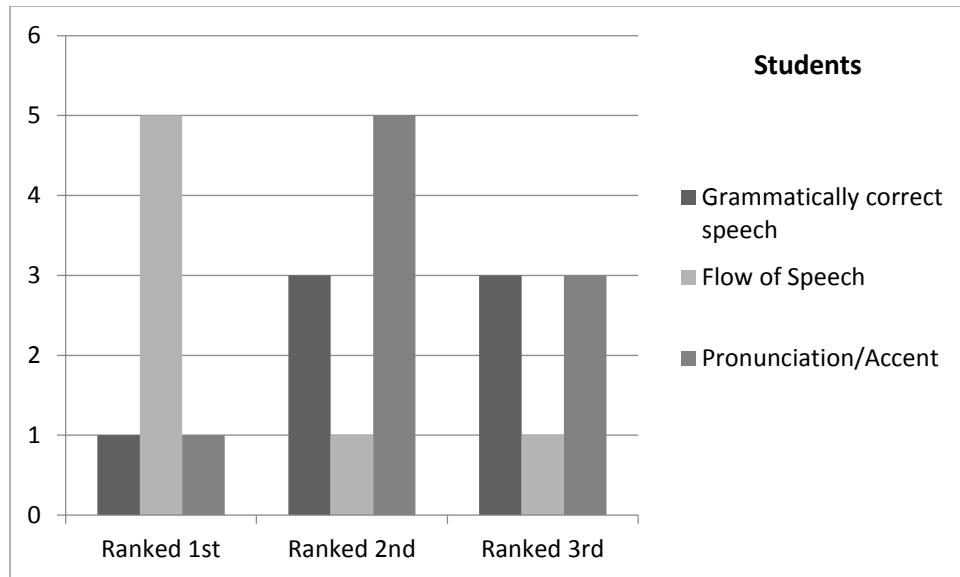
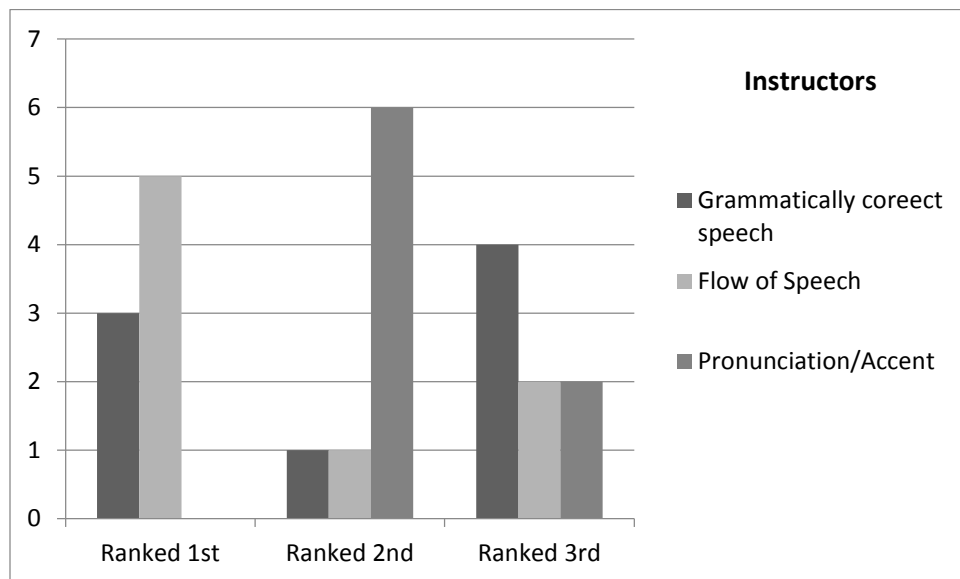
Monologue 3: Katie (Figure 2.3) which was considered to be the least fluent speech sample, surprisingly still had eight participants rate her as “Somewhat Fluent,” with 14 choosing “Not fluent at all.” Positive answers respondents gave for Katie’s monologue included: good self-correction, appropriate grammar, varied vocabulary, comprehension of speakers, and good

pronunciation, while negative responses included stuttering, long hesitations, poor pronunciation/accent, small vocabulary, poor verb conjugation, and too much self-correction.

FIGURE 2.3: Katie



The final question on the listening survey was, “Please rank the following elements of speech, starting with the one you think is most important in evaluating fluency (1 as most important, 3 as least important.)” The elements of speech given were: Speech that is grammatically correct, The flow of speech, and Pronunciation/accent. (Figure 2.4 and 2.5) In this question instructors ranked “Speech that is grammatically correct” as first more often than students; however, instructors also ranked this same element, grammatically correct speech, as third more often than the other two elements. “Flow of speech” was ranked as first by equal amounts of students and instructors, while “Pronunciation/Accent” was most often ranked as second by both students and instructors. “Speech that is grammatically correct” was ranked third by students most often. consistently rated as second.

FIGURE 2.4 Student Rankings**FIGURE 2.5: Instructor Rankings**

Study 1 Conclusions

The majority of students and instructors defined fluency as the flow of speech and the ability to communicate effectively; however, in addition to flow of speech there were many other perspectives on what constitutes fluency. Based on the responses of both students and instructors, comprehensible speech could also be added to the definition based on how many times it appeared in the responses.⁶ An overwhelming majority of students said that one develops fluency through immersion, with “practice” as a close second, although it was not clarified by the students how they defined “practice.” The top three activities students said they participate in to develop fluent speech were reading, attending class, and speaking. The majority of the instructors said they employ speaking and listening strategies in the classroom to help their students become more fluent. While this study provided a wide range of perspectives, I suggest another study which involves language learners of various languages would perhaps provide even more insight into varying perspectives of the fluency concept.

Study 2 Conclusions

In all three speech samples, the variety of responses was surprising, with some even contradicting each other, for example, in Monologue 1: Aaron, he was described as a “confident speaker” by one participant, but by another he was described as an “uncomfortable speaker.” It was also surprising how much the responses strayed from the proposed response for each monologue. Monologue 1: Aaron (proposed rating as “Somewhat Fluent”) was for the most part rated as “Somewhat Fluent,” but many respondents also chose “Not Fluent at all” and one chose “Most Fluent.” The results of Monologue 2: Emma (proposed rating as “Most Fluent”) were

⁶ The concept of comprehensible speech could be argued as an element of speech flow; thus, when coding responses, the problem of subjectivity arose pertaining to the coder’s perspective. To mitigate this issue, I propose that additional coders would be useful in order to obtain more accurate response readings of qualitative data.

also surprising, as the “Somewhat Fluent” and “Most Fluent” ratings were nearly tied. Monologue 3: Katie (proposed rating as “Not Fluent at all”) had the least surprising results with 14 ratings of “Not Fluent at all” and eight “Somewhat Fluent” ratings. While the variation is surprising, I propose that it was due to the varying levels of German proficiency on the part of the survey participants, with levels ranging from undergraduate freshmen to professors of German at the university, including both native and non-native speakers of German. Due to this variation, this survey could be potentially more informative if the students and instructors were divided into two surveys, as in the first study. To go a step further, the students and instructors could then be divided into categories based on their college or teaching level.

Summary and Future Research

The results of both studies have brought to light valuable information pertaining to students’ and instructors’ perspectives of the fluency concept, and in addition, have demonstrated the complexity of the fluency concept and the wide range of perspectives. The first research question, “Do language learners and instructors view fluency differently?” can be answered in part, although the participant responses demonstrate the complexity of this question. While the majority of students and instructors defined fluency as the flow of speech and ease in conversation, many additional perspectives made up their definitions. Furthermore, the instructors’ responses were much more complex and detailed than students, demonstrating their experience and knowledge within the realm language learning and the fluency concept. Not only did the instructors’ responses vary and branch out from the students’ responses, but they also differed from each other’s. This confirms that within the language instruction institution, instructors may have different views on what constitutes fluency, if only small variations. Because of this, it is important to be aware of these variances when it comes to speaking

assessment and rubrics in the instruction of the L2, in order to achieve a more universal assessment of L2 learning.

The second research question, “Is the fluency concept too subjective to come to a clear, universal definition?” is complicated, as well. The results of both studies show that the fluency concept is, indeed, quite complex, and more studies need to be done in order to reach a clearer definition of fluency for language instruction institutions. Perhaps a universal definition of fluency in spoken language can never be attained; however, within the university, this research demonstrates the importance of simply being aware of others’ perspectives on fluency. I suggest that a study which compares various speech assessment rubrics from universities on a national and international level would be helpful in acquiring a clearer definition of fluency.

This study exhibits the discussion of Chamber’s (1997) article, and shows that within this one department of the university studied, that the fluency concept is not completely clear. If this can apply to the German department, then surely it applies to other foreign language departments within the university as well. This confirms that a way to define fluency more clearly is needed. In addition, this study confirms Bosker et al.’s (2012) findings that judgements on fluency are subjective. When looking back to the data of Survey1: Instructor Questionnaire, this is evident in the wide range of instructor responses in defining fluency. It is also interesting to note the complexity of the instructor responses in comparison to the student responses when it comes to fluency. Instructors responses were much more detailed and demonstrate their knowledge of the fluency concept, while students’ responses tended to be more on the generic side, that is, what they have been taught from previous teachers about fluency. This study confirms Freed’s (2000) research as well, that the fluency concept is much broader than the flow of speech, as shown in the student and instructor results that list many other components of fluency besides flow of

conversation, although the flow of speech comes up most often between students and instructors. To return to Segalowitz's (2010) definition of fluency, "language is motion" (p. 4), fluency is an element of speech which is ever-changing alongside time and culture. As the world changes, so must our definition of fluency, which, of course, includes educational instruction. The questionnaire portion of this study points to the ever-changing concept of fluency, as the definition of the fluency concept varied with each individual.

The listening portion of the study correlates with Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) study that showed the differences of pragmatic and grammatical concepts between EFL and ESL learners. In the ranking question at the end, instructors ranked "Speech that is grammatically correct" as first more often than students. This could potentially show the importance of grammatical concepts that instructors hold when it comes to speech; however, although this seems significant, it is important to note that students and instructors also ranked "Grammatically correct speech" as third more often than the other two elements. "Flow of speech" was ranked as first by equal amounts of students and instructors, while "Pronunciation/Accent" was most often ranked as second by both students and instructors. "Speech that is grammatically correct" was ranked third by students most often. This unclarity on what constitutes fluency is evident in this ranking exercise and demonstrates the varying ideas of fluency. Pinget et al.'s (2014) findings correlate to the listening portion of the study as well, when it comes to foreign accent. As mentioned above, "Pronunciation/Accent" was significantly most often ranked as second by both students and instructors. This is significant, because the data for the other two categories were distributed more randomly, however "Pronunciation/Accent" was consistently rated as second. This could imply that instructors and students view Pronunciation/Accent similarly and perhaps shows that this is an element that could be considered separate from fluency.

This study contributes the idea that fluency is indeed, multi-faceted, and that, perhaps the speech assessment rubrics are not set up in a way that reflects this. From the information found in this study, I suggest that a way to mitigate the problem is the restructuring of speech assessment rubrics. When it comes to the category of “fluency” on language assessment rubrics, this category should be reconstructed to include the varying elements of fluency (as defined by students and instructors) that were found in this study. An example would be under the “fluency” category, include a checklist which would include: flow of speech (i.e. small amount of hesitations, feels comfortable using the language), grammatical accuracy, quality of accent, and correct vocabulary usage. This is just an example, but it illustrates the varying qualities of fluency and the importance to separate these elements so that students can be judged accordingly and shown what they need to improve on when it comes to their speech fluency.

My definition of fluency has grown tremendously from this study. I now suggest that fluency is made up of many elements that all deserve to be given attention to equally, not limited to flow of speech, cultural competency, grammatical accuracy, the smooth exchange of conversation, and when one reaches (the ultimate level) of fluency, I suggest then that one would be able to think in the L2, without the need for conversion from one’s native language to the L2 before speaking, reading, or writing.

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